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Bill Horner

Eastern Washington University

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SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND SOCIAL ASSESSMENT

Bill Horner

Eastern Washington University

ABSTRACT

Social work needs a theoretical perspective that will provide impetus to the development of its unique function: social assessment and social intervention. The images and concepts characterizing symbolic interactionism seem to have the potential of meeting this need. This paper explores the perspective with the intent of suggesting its utility for assessing and intervening in interpersonal and environmental circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the utility of an approach to sociological inquiry called symbolic interactionism for social work practice. Social work practice is conceived as an applied social science. Symbolic interactionism is conceived as a theoretical perspective in social science. Thus, the relationship between symbolic interactionism, conceived as a philosophy, and social work, conceived as an ideology, will not be discussed. However, it should be noted that the basis for such a discussion exists in their mutual humanistic orientation. Furthermore, philosophers like George Herbert Mead and John Dewey worked with, and were close personal friends with, humanists in social work like Jane Addams. (Lasch, 1965: 175-183)

As an empirical social science, the utility of symbolic interactionism lies in three areas: constructive criticism, i.e., symbolic interactionists have provided social work, and other professions, with provocative and useful criticisms of practices in various social service programs; substantive, i.e., this approach could be borrowed from sociology to develop the function of social assessment; and methodological, i.e., symbolic interactionism offers an approach to data collection for social assessment that is essential. It will be the burden of this essay to illustrate the utility of symbolic interactionism in each of these three areas. However, some constraints must be placed on this task.

Symbolic interactionism is a robust approach to the study of human affairs. A single essay can do no more than demonstrate some of the ways in which this approach can contribute to a particular practice activity. Thus, the presentational strategy is to describe only some of the basic ideas making up this approach.

Although these ideas were selected because of their relevance to social assessment, it should not be assumed that they are the only, or even the most important ideas bearing on this practice task.

Although many concepts, propositions, and issues surround the task of social assessment, this is not the place to discuss them. A brief definition will have to suffice for the purposes of this essay. The focus of social assessment is on interpersonal, interactional, and environmental contingencies in the lives of people. (Briar, 1976) Social assessment may be contrasted with psychological or, more bluntly, trait assessment. The tasks are, of course, premised on different conceptions of behavior; social assessment assigns much more importance to the role of situations and social interaction. Where psychological assessment is concerned with the stable, nontrivial, observable properties of individuals, social assessment is concerned with such properties in situations and relationships. Social assessment, as a professional activity, is surrounded with difficulties not to be found in trait assessment. Most of them are best captured in the saying, "It's a big world out there." That is, the interacting forces that constitute the focus of social assessment are many, traversing several so-called "systems," with complex and subtle linkages. Decisions on the nature of problematic interpersonal and environmental phenomena are difficult to come by under such circumstances. (Horner and Morris, 1977)

Symbolic interactionism is useful in ordering and making that world comprehensible. Any theory can make that claim but not with reference to the special and unique domain that constitutes the focus of social assessment.

CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISMS

The diversification of social welfare programs during the 1960's began a search for a new knowledge base within the social work profession. That search, which continues today, has led social work away from an individual, clinical, personality, therapeutic orientation and toward an orientation that emphasizes context, situation, interaction and environment. Unfortunately, the search is also characterized by the same tendency toward the uncritical acceptance of borrowed knowledge that prevailed during the 1950's. Now it seems that an exclusive emphasis on the pathology of situations threatens to replace the professions earlier emphasis on the pathology of individuals. Where the individual, or at most the family, was held solely responsible for such problems as alcoholism or delinquency, the current tendency is increasingly to hold the economic or political order solely responsible. Actually, two problems are involved here. Symbolic interactionism speaks to both of them.

The tendency to think in terms of "one extreme or the other" is counteracted by the focus of symbolic interactionism: "The point of departure for symbolic interaction theory is the dialectic interdependence between the human organism and his natural and social environments." (Singlemann 1972: 415) Moreover, the

basic ideas that make up the perspective of symbolic interactionism are applicable to the individual and larger entities.

The more fundamental tendency toward the uncritical acceptance social science knowledge requires a healthy dose of empiricism. Here we move closer to the contribution of symbolic interactionism in the area of constructive criticism. Further, a point of convergence between symbolic interactionist and gadflies within social work can be observed. Their criticisms center on the concepts used in their respective fields of interest. Briar, addressing social workers, singles out such practice concepts as authenticity, ego strength, and more recent social systems concepts such as homeostasis, pattern variables, general systems. Also named is a favorite concept of sociologists, anomie. Briar's criticism of these and other concepts used in practice is "...that all these orienting concepts (and I could give a very long list) have no tangible, observable referents in the real world." (1973: 23) Blumer, addressing sociologists, nonetheless singles out concepts that are frequently employed by social workers: deviance, dysfunction, pathology, disorganization and structural strain. It seems that these concepts are as useless to the social scientist interested in the study of social problems as they are to the social worker. Their lack of utility stems from the same problem mentioned by Briar. The problem is stated by Blumer as follows:

These concepts are useless as means of identifying social problems. For one thing, none of them has a set of benchmarks that enable the scholar to identify in the empirical world the so-called instances of deviance, dysfunction or structural strain. Lacking such clear identifying characteristics, the scholar cannot take up each and every social condition or arrangement in society and establish that it is or is not an instance of deviance, dysfunction, or structural strain. (1971: 299-300)

Social work can take a first step toward critical thinking by adopting an empirical criterion for the selection of concepts for practice. Such a stance would go a long way toward freeing the profession from the tyranny of conceptual fads.

As Blumer's remarks illustrate, symbolic interactionists have always done a very good job as "problem staters." Their insights and analytical abilities enable them to identify and describe the central problems within a given field or area of inquiry. Nowhere is this more evident than in the social services; several investigators representing this perspective have made major contributions to our understanding of matters related to these services (e.g., Piliavin and Briar, 1964; Goffman, 1961; Gottlieb, 1974; Wiseman, 1970). One illustration will have to suffice.

Wiseman's study (1970) focused on interactions between skid row alcoholics and various correctional and social service facilities. Social workers can learn a lot that is useful from this book about the typical patterns of daily living and

interpersonal relationships among skid row men. However, perhaps most important for the development of responsive and effective social services are two conclusions supported by numerous findings throughout the book. First, the images social workers (and other staff) bring to skid row are vastly different from those brought by their clients. These images bear on all of the key objects making up the world of skid row: procedures for processing alcoholics within and between services, therapy and other rehabilitation efforts, attributes of skid row men, attributes of correctional and social service personnel, and so on. Never has the saying, "they come from different worlds" fit better than when discussing these clients and their helpers and controllers. Moreover, although social workers and other helpers pride themselves on their empathetic skills, Wiseman's book leaves no doubt about their complete failure to "take the role of the other" and view life as the skid row man views it. The result is often ludicrous as in the case of the helpers seriously applying a therapeutic technology that was originally designed with quite different people and problems in mind, never glimpsing the possibility that this approach may not be relevant to the situations the skid row man must handle.

The second major conclusion supported by Wiseman's investigation is that the behavior of skid row men during their interactions with agency personnel represents their effort to cope with the situations created by the latter group. Needless to say, these situations are viewed by skid row men as hostile to their needs (including the need to reduce alcohol consumption) and self-esteem. Nonetheless, they must deal with them to meet basic needs. Thus, the behavior interpreted by social workers as the result of various deficits in character, is more accurately viewed as the result of the client's attempt to cope with a hostile situation created by people from alien social worlds.

The implication of these and other studies representing the perspective of symbolic interactionism is that social services should be "grafted" on the lives of clients as they experience them. To develop such services, social workers must learn how clients view situations they daily encounter and what interactions sustain these views.

A final illustration of the gadfly contribution has to do with society's response to social problems. This illustration is selected because of its timeliness: schools of social work have been revising their curricula in the hope the social workers can have more of an impact in the realm of public policy. Courses in management, social planning, policy analysis, and programming at the federal and state level are now typical offerings.

Nonetheless, it is likely that recent graduates would be at a loss to explain: why some problems are noticed by the public and not others; why some problems are legitimated by significant figures and organizations while others are ignored; how the definitions of particular interest groups come to prevail in discussions of social problems; how agencies transform plans (that have been developed) at the legislative level. Although Blumer (1971) directed such questions to sociologists

desiring a hand in shaping public policy, they would be equally puzzling to social work students. The difficulty has to do with a failure to understand the nature of social problems and thus an inability to understand, much less influence, the way in which society responds to them.

Blumer argues that social problems are wrongly defined in terms of such objective features as incidence rates, demographic characteristics of the target population, and other identifiable conditions in society. These features do not help one understand the nature of a social problem or provide an efficacious means of handling it. These objective statements are important only insofar as they find a place in the collective process by which a social problem is identified and acted toward. This collective process stands apart from the objective makeup of a social problem. It is this process that must be understood if social workers are to influence public policy. (Blumer, 1971)

The career of a social problem consists of five stages identified by Blumer as follows: "the emergence of a social problem, the legitimation of the problem, the mobilization of action with regard to the problem, the formation of an official plan of action, and the transformation of the official plan in its empirical implementation." (1971: 301) The fate of a social problem is precarious as it moves into contact with diverse groups representing diverse interests during these different points in its career. At each point, different interactional strategies are employed in a multitude of formal and informal gatherings in order to redefine the problem in a way compatible with one's particular interest group. Most importantly, Blumer argues convincingly that we know very little about what happens within each stage or the nature of the collective process that moves a social problem from one stage to another.

This concludes the discussion of the contributions made by symbolic interactionists in the area of constructive criticism. It is hoped that these few illustrations have also suggested something of the nature of this theoretical perspective. If the presentational strategy has been successful, it will have kindled a desire to learn more about the substance of symbolic interactionism, a topic addressed in the next section.

SUBSTANTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

In his introduction to some of the complexities surrounding the study of stigma, Goffman noted, "...it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes is really needed. (1963: 3) As the social work profession faces the challenge of developing social assessment (and social intervention) as its unique function, Goffman's comment is significant because of what it suggests is not needed. The statement implies that a conceptual scheme, if not the words to convey it parsimoniously or with the desired amount of precision, is available to the sociologist wishing to investigate the relationship between stereotype and attribute. This, indeed, is what symbolic interactionism offers.

Social work is in desperate need of a conceptual scheme that is sufficiently inclusive to cover the vast domain suggested by the function social assessment as defined in this essay. The perspective should also be consistent with the hallmark of social work: a serious concern with the uniqueness of the individual and family in terms of their reality, aspirations, and potential. Symbolic interactionism fits both requirements. The perspective is sufficiently expansive to have been labeled "grand-theoretical." (Singlemann, 1972: 415) It is also consistent with social work's concern with the uniqueness of people: the perspective "...facilitates the description and explanation of the variability and flexibility that characterizes human conduct." (Shibutani, 1961: 70)

This section will outline the conceptual world of symbolic interactionism and comment on its utility for the task of social assessment in social work practice. The perspective, originally developed by George Herbert Mead, has undergone several different modifications in the hands of late writers such as Blumer, Goffman, Berger and Luckmann. This section and the next will draw most heavily from the writings of Blumer (1946, 1969, 1971). Such a decision finally seemed necessary because of the differences in focus and emphasis among various writers (e.g., see Blumer on Goffman; Blumer, 1972).

Stated simply, social assessment requires an accurate picture of the environment in relation to the lives of people. As both symbolic interactionists and social workers have stressed, a respect for the empirical world requires the relinquishment of pre-established judgments and beliefs as well as common sense notions about people and problems. It also requires empathy or the ability to "take the role of the other" (Straus, 1956: 212-260).

It is the beginning of wisdom in social assessment, as the symbolic interactionists inadvertently remind us, to note that this is an instance of social interaction. Moreover, it is an instance involving the sorts of actors and relationships extensively studied by Goffman (1959). The actors are relatively unfamiliar with one another; unlike, say family relationships, significant aspects of the private life of both are unknown. Under such circumstances both actors will feel need to provide and gather information bearing on the identity of the other or to use the information they already possess. They will want to create a particular impression and will engage in actions to support this impression and prevent it from being discredited. This is one way in which they are able to control the actions of the other person, a most important aspect of the situation confronted.

While it is often true that people try to control unfamiliar situations through strategies aimed at identity management, the more fundamental insight offered by symbolic interactionism is that this may not be the case in any given instance of social interaction. A first premise of symbolic interactionism is that people respond to things according to the meaning they have from them. (Blumer, 1969: 2) Thus, rather than indulge a pre-established belief about what

determines the exact nature of social interaction, the social worker should attempt to gain a fresh, empirically valid understanding of these events. However, this injunction will be taken seriously only to the extent that social workers are able to formulate a general answer to the question: "What is social interaction?" Before it can be assessed in the particular instance, it must be understood as a general category of life.

Social interaction, a central focus of social assessment, is mostly symbolic. Symbolic interaction occurs whenever one reflects on the meaning of the other's gesture. This category of interaction thus includes all but reflex actions, e.g., jumping at the unexpected sound of a door slamming. Symbolic interaction is commonly referred to in everyday discourse as in the statement, "Sure I heard what he said, but I think he's bluffing, so let's proceed as planned." Here we see that the meaning attached to a gesture through reflection (interpretation) was different from the meaning "other," intended "self" to receive. (Blumer, 1969)

Gestures in social interaction are also broadly defined by symbolic interactionists. They include physical movements and verbal expressions, including very lengthy expressions such as explanations. Gestures contain three elements, all dealing with meaning. They indicate: what the actor plans or intends, what the other should do or understand, and how both can act together. The expression, "we see eye to eye on this matter," suggests that the hazards surrounding the presentation and interpretation of gestures covering these domains have been successfully overcome.

Communicating meanings through gestures and attaching meanings to gestures requires taking the role of the other. "What does the client expect of me as a social worker?" To answer this question one must view the situation from the vantage point of the other, and in so doing, assign meanings to the other's gestures. "How can I convey to the client my understanding of the services offered through the agency?" An answer to this question also requires role taking, in this case to determine what gesture to send. Social interaction develops through this process of indicating to others about something and interpreting the indications sent by them.

Beyond such definitional matters, the nature of social interaction is assigned a unique role in the perspective of symbolic interactionism. It is conceived as a determinant of individual and collective action. The actor organizes his conduct in light of the meanings assigned to the other's gestures. Plans are changed, explanations altered, actions suspended as one notes and handles the gestures of others. By implication, individual action is not the result of social roles, norms, values, and the like; nor is it a medium through which attitudes and feelings express themselves. These and other concepts treat social interaction as a passive medium or conduit through which things flow. The determining nature of social interaction is recognized in everyday discourse as in the statement, "I was going to tell her, but after she said that, I just couldn't." It should be recognized that such shifts in strategy and mission due to social interaction are

profoundly consequential. The nature of family interaction, corporate relationships, transactions between social service agencies and the like will look very different because of them.

The importance of social interaction does not end here. Symbolic interactionists further conceive of it as the source of meaning. That is, the meanings things have arise and change as a function of social interaction. They are social products, influenced by "...the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing." (Blumer, 1969: 4) By implication, meaning is not intrinsic to a thing nor to what the person brings to the thing in terms of moods, attitudes and so on. This is a second major premise of symbolic interactionism. Since people act on the basis of the meanings things have for them, the question of how such meanings develop and change becomes important.

It is a mistake, however, to assume that the meanings acquired through social interaction are applied directly when the person is in the presence of the thing. Symbolic interactionists are impatient with the limited role assigned to the Central Nervous System by behaviorists. The CNS does more than merely answer stimuli. Rather it engages in a process of selecting objects to handle in the environment and reorganizing meanings attached to them in view of the particulars of the situation and purpose of action. This process of interpretation constitutes a third major premise of symbolic interaction.

Actually, symbolic interactionism does not speak of a CNS. The term preferred is "self" and the self is conceived as a process. It is forever engaged in communication about objects in the environment. Thus, the self is social in the sense that it makes indications to itself and reflects upon what has been indicated.

The self can also be the subject of interaction and this too is a social process. The individual takes the role of the other and defines himself from that unique vantage point. More precisely, three types of roles may be taken: that of another individual, an organized group, and the "generalized other" or community.

The self is given substance as it is viewed from each of these vantage points. This is an important matter for, as Shibutani has said, "...much of what men do voluntarily depends upon what they conceive of themselves to be." (1961: 214)

As defined above, the self is one element of the individual's social world. This world or environment is, fundamentally, a world of objects. An object is anything that the individual can point to, refer to, or otherwise note. The world of objects may be conveniently grouped into three categories: physical (trees, tables, etc.), social objects (fathers, cons, etc.), and abstract objects (symbolic interactionism, liberty, etc.). (Blumer, 1969: 10) Objects have no intrinsic nature; their nature lies in their meaning for the individual. The common expression, "they live in different worlds" points to the extant diversity in environ-

ments. This should not suggest, however, that understanding between people is impossible. For the meanings attached to objects are flexibly held and, as mentioned, change through social interaction.

Before leaving this brief survey of the conceptual world of symbolic interactionism, mention must be made of joint action. This concept refers to the fitting together of lines of action of several people. Examples of joint action include: a family meeting, labor-management negotiations, and complex processes of production as in the case of producing automobiles and breakfast cereals. These examples suggest some of the main features of joint action: it may be studied without the need to break it down into the separate actions of each individual; joint action often consists of repetitive patterns, suggesting common pre-established meanings; and it often involves very different sorts of actions at different points in time.

It is also important to state what is not meant by joint action. It is not an automatic process. Every joint action must be formed anew, even those recurrent patterns of joint action. Such formation will involve designation and interpretation; even pre-established meanings must be reaffirmed in order to guide the process of joint action. Thus, repetitive action still demands that each instance be built anew by the actors.

Furthermore, joint action is not synonymous with repetitive action. Situations are constantly arising for which common meanings are inadequate, if they exist at all. Areas of unprescribed conduct often take center stage; problems of living spring up that are without precedent. These innovations are constants in joint action, an idea captured in the saying, "no two situations are quite the same." Under such circumstances, joint action requires the creation of new meanings (e.g., rules) that may be used to designate to various actors what is expected of them in the face of the novel situation.

Joint action is not the result of such abstractions as "system maintenance requirements." Efficacy is no more to be attributed to systemic factors than to norms, values, and roles. These factors become important only if they are "brought in" to be acted upon during joint action. That is, joint action persists because people do different things at different points and times. However, "...the sets of meanings that lead participants to act as they do at their stationed points in the network have their own setting in a localized process of social interaction ...and...these meanings are formed, sustained, weakened, strengthened, or transformed, as the case may be..." through a process of designation and interpretation. (Blumer, 1969: 20)

Finally, joint action has a career. Participants bring to joint action sets of objects and meanings as well as frameworks for interpretation. Joint action cannot be understood apart from its history.

This brief survey of major images and concepts in symbolic interactionism must suffice for the purpose of suggesting its utility for assessment in social work practice. Because of space limitations, the format adopted for the duration of this section will be to indicate the major questions this perspective promotes concerning assessment along with some comments pointing to its utility.

1. What is social assessment? Symbolic interactionism pushes our understanding of the nature of this task beyond the general conception set forth at the beginning of this paper. It does so by identifying and developing a conception of each of the major elements of social assessment; social interaction, individual conduct, the self, the environment, and joint action. In addition, symbolic interaction offers a general focus for social assessment: people engaged in action. Whatever concept is employed for the purpose of describing or explaining behavior, it must remain true to what people do, it must be consistent with how people act toward one another as they handle various situations.

2. How is social assessment different from a value judgment? Social workers are constantly accused, and accusing each other, of imposing middle class values on unwilling clients. Symbolic interactionism possesses several constraints against this tendency but mention here will be made only of the concepts employed. First consider such concepts: "inability to delay gratification," "inappropriate affect," and "weak ego." Two problems with these and other concepts used by social workers are that they are overly evocative and have distinct mental health connotation. They not only arouse strong reactions in others, but also subtly shift attention away from social matters to those pertaining to the individual and his mental and emotional functioning. Within this focus, nearly every concept suggests some sort of value judgment to someone. The concepts employed in symbolic interactionism, on the other hand, appear not to suffer from these shortcomings. Thus, they are relatively objective, they refer to actions not traits, and they do not detract from a social focus in assessment.

3. Why has this problem occurred? This major and constant question in social assessment is dealt with in a unique way by symbolic interactionism. Depending on the rudimentary particulars of the problem, answers to this question may be found in several areas: (a) the stages and processes of group development; (b) the effect of group activities, i.e., joint action, formal and informal groups, institutions; (c) interactional strategies of the key participants, e.g., falsification, silence, diversionary tactics; (d) self-interaction, e.g., the individual guided himself badly in the situation, or misinterpreted the gestures of other, or misinformed them as to his plans; and (e) the meanings assigned to objects, e.g., the expectations assigned to particular roles, the norms assigned to particular situations, the values attached to particular behaviors. Within these areas, some of which differ only in emphasis, explanations may be found for the origin and maintenance of most problems of living.

4. What objects make up the individual's social world and how are they defined? Meanings imputed to these objects by the individual actor, not the

outside observer, must be understood. People act in terms of their definition of the situation not the definition held by others. Thus, social assessment must reflect an understanding of how key objects are viewed by those who must deal with them.

5. What factors and processes impinge upon meanings? This question is especially relevant to the meanings that underlie joint action. Concern is with the processes that reinforce meanings, erode meanings, or ignore meanings. (Blumer, 1969: 18) The fate of definitions that govern actions constitutes a rich source of material for social assessment. Indeed, in view of the frequently heard refrain concerning the "loss of meaning" in this or that sphere of human endeavor, it is surprising that so little attention is given to the processes promoting atrophy.

6. What is the nature of the actor's social self? This is undoubtedly the most important single object in the individual's social world. Thus, it should receive independent attention during assessment. Concern here is with how the actor thinks he is being regarded by other individuals, groups, and large entities. How much time does the actor spend ruminating about, and devising ways to influence the impressions he is making on other people?

This section may be concluded by simply reiterating that symbolic interactionism promotes an understanding of ongoing group life. Group life consists of people engaged in joint and individual actions to handle the situations confronting them. In short, this perspective promotes a serious concern with the social worlds of people. Therein lies the utility of symbolic interactionism for social assessment.

The overriding concern of social assessment--an understanding of social problems, their determinants and their modifiability--requires an understanding of the separate social worlds of clients. The social worker must recognize the tendency of people to develop different social worlds and must strive to understand these worlds. More particularly, social assessment must focus on "...the parade of situations..." the actors must handle, the views, beliefs and conceptions they construct to handle them, the nature of their interactions and relationships, and their institutions and organizations. (Blumer, 1969: 39)

METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The social worker needs to acquire a method of data collection that supports a preoccupation with social assessment. Such a method is naturalistic observation of the client's social world. It is the purpose of this section to briefly depict this method as viewed by Herbert Blumer (1969).

Two modes of inquiry characterize naturalistic observation. Both could be adapted to the task of data collection for social assessment. They are labeled "exploration" and "inspection" by Blumer.

The purpose of exploration is twofold: to become better acquainted with the client's social world, and to develop a better understanding of how to proceed in further inquiry. Included in the latter objective would be an understanding of what questions to ask and how to ask them. A cue that the social worker had begun to sharpen a line of inquiry would be the feeling of being at home in discussions of the client's social world. Social workers talk a lot about the "real world" but one wonders about their ability to engage clients in discussions that are meaningful and relevant to their different social worlds.

Obstacles to the realization of these objectives are several and significant. First, social workers are victims of fads in theory and ideology. Fads constitute effective blinders, screening out and distorting aspects of the client's social world. Pre-established beliefs, biases, values, and normative theories tell the social worker what is "really important" and obviate the need to pay more than lip service to the injunction to take the role of the other. Second, agency protocols interfere with an approach to data collection that strives to understand and remain faithful to the client's social world. Mention here should be made of the current tendency to develop standardized data collection forms and checklists. Whether the items contained in such standardized formats reflect an understanding of the client's social world is open to question. At any rate, any agency procedure that interferes with efforts to develop a full and accurate understanding of the client's world should be resisted. A third obstacle is an unwillingness to flexibly employ the full array of data collection techniques available. Virtually all of the procedures named in Blumer's discussion of exploration, and more, are available to the social worker:

"...direct observation, interviewing of people, listening to their conversations, securing life history accounts, using letters and diaries, consulting public records, arranging for group discussions, and making counts of an item..."(1969: 41)

The hallmark of the procedure of exploration is disciplined flexibility. The social worker would shift among techniques of inquiry, conceptual tools, beliefs about relevant concerns and so on as appears necessary in light of the developing portrait of the client's social world. However, three guidelines may be offered for exploration. First, observant, informed and articulate participants in the client's social world should be utilized. The client may or may not be a capable informant; a small discussion group is often the best resource. Second, in light of the possible limitations of even the best informants for the purposes of social assessment, direct observation of the client's social world is essential. Such a first-hand examination will provide the information necessary for the refinement and testing of images. Third, to prevent the development of a fixed set of beliefs, the social worker should: (a) constantly ask questions about the client's social world and (b) "... record all observations that challenge one's working conceptions as any observation that is odd and interesting even though its relevance is not immediately clear." (Blumer, 1969: 42)

Exploration will result in full and accurate descriptive accounts of the client's social world. This may be sufficient for the purpose of social intervention and the social worker need not be concerned with invoking conceptual schemes or theories. The social assessment is completed with a description of the client's social world. However, the theoretically minded social worker will often want to push beyond exploration to inspection.

The purpose of inspection would be to develop general statements about the nature of the client's social problem including statements about determinants and consequences. Inspection involves the careful examination of the empirical instances (discovered during exploration) covered by the social worker's concepts.

As an example of inspection, consider the case of a recently retired worker referred to a mental health facility because of excessive depression. How would the social worker proceed to analyze the descriptive accounts, gained through discussions with a small resource group of men and women who had undergone the same experience? First, concepts such as role loss, disengagement or whatever would be defined in empirical terms tested for validity, and discriminated from other analytical elements. This would be done by examining the empirical instances of the concepts:

The prototype of inspection is represented by our handling of a strange object; we pick it up, look at it closely, turn it over as we view it, look at it from this or that angle, raise questions as to what it might be, go back and handle it again in the light of our questions, try it out, and test it in one way or another. (Blumer, 1969: 44)

In this way, the social worker would seek to tease out the generic nature of concepts like role loss as well as determine whether they were relevant and valid in terms of the social worlds of recently retired persons.

The second step in social analysis would be to search for relationships between concepts that have now been clearly discriminated at the empirical level. Thus after pinpointing the empirical referents of such concepts as role loss and depression, the social worker needs to examine empirical instances of their relationship. Here the validity of a relationship rather than a concept is at issue.

Naturalistic observation is prescribed by Blumer to the social scientist seeking to understand some aspect of the social life of people. However, it would seem that this mode of inquiry has considerable utility for data collection for the purpose of social assessment. The social worker needs an approach to data collection that respects the empirical character of the client's social world and this is the hallmark of naturalistic observation.

CONCLUSION

Symbolic interactionism has proven itself in the area of constructive criticism. This perspective has supplied social work with many trenchant insights into problems of the social services. This essay suggests its utility does not end there. Symbolic interactionism can also furnish social work with a conception of the social world and a procedure for gathering information relevant to the social realities of client groups. These substantive and methodological contributions should be most welcome at a time when social work is reaffirming its historical commitment to social assessment and social intervention.

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